

ROMAN ŚMIGIELSKI

130 YEARS OF POLISH EMIGRATION IN DENMARK

SEASONAL MIGRATION

Next year will mark 130 years since the first Polish seasonal workers – mainly young girls – arrived from Galicia on the Danish islands of Lolland and Falster. This took place on 18 April 1893.

The dynamically developing Danish agriculture (mainly sugar beet cultivation) created a demand for foreign labour. From 1893 until the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the number of seasonal (spring to autumn) migrants from the Polish lands increased from 400 to 14,500 people per year. It is calculated that a total of about 100,000 Polish migrants (some repeatedly) stayed in Denmark for seasonal work between 1893 and 1914. They were employed mainly on the islands of Lolland, Falster, Funen, Møn, as well as in southern Zealand and the eastern and southern part of the Jutland peninsula.

The work put into growing sugar beet was arduous and unimaginably hard. Everything was done by hand and with a curved back – at sowing and weeding with short hoes, and at harvest when the beetroots were cut off the leaves and loaded onto trailers.

The workers were housed in primitive barracks called “Polish barracks” (Danish: *polakkaserne*), which were built in the middle of nowhere, away from the buildings where the Danes lived. In many places Poles were very poorly paid and treated inhumanely. Part of their wages was farm produce: potatoes and milk. This constituted their basic sustenance.

ROMAN ŚMIGIELSKI – Member of the World Polonia Council, Chief Editor of the quarterly “Informator Polski. Kwartalnik społeczno-kulturalny,” Denmark; e-mail: roman@smigielski.dk.



Photography 1. Sugarbeet girls

Catholic priests and later trade unions and some political parties were first to come to the defence of Polish workers. In 1908, after a long debate lasting several months, the Danish Parliament *Folketing* passed the Act on the Employment of Foreign Workers, commonly referred to in Denmark as the “Poles’ Law” (Danish: *Polakloven*). The Act regulated the conditions for contracting, wages, housing, insurance and dismissal of workers. It was the first such legislative document worldwide. Many of the act’s provisions could be incorporated into legislation today, e.g. that the contract should be drawn up in Danish and Polish no later than 14 days after the employee’s arrival in Denmark, that employers are obliged to insure employees against illness, provide them with free medicine and stay in hospital for up to six months (if the illness or accident was not the employee’s fault).

1912.



Autoriseret af det kongelige danske
Indenrigsministerium i Henhold til
Lov Nr. 229 af 21. August 1908 om uden-
landske Arbejders Anvendelse i Dan-
mark og det offentlige Tilsyn dermed.

Arbejdskontrakt for polske og andre udenlandske Vandrearbejdere i Danmark.

Forarbejdere . dozorów	
Ægtepar mażeńskich par	
Piger..... dziewcząt	
Karlé chłopaków.....	
Store Drengé . większych chłopców	
Mindre Drengé mniejszych chłopców	
Talt... razem...	



Ulegalizowany przez królewsko duńskie
ministerstwo spraw wewnętrznych po-
dług ustawy no.229 z d.21.sierpnia1908 r.
o używaniu zagranicznych robotników w
Danii i o nadzorze rządowym nad temże.

Kontrakt roboczy dla polskich i innych zagranicznych robotników sezonowych w Danii.

Mellem undertegnede Arbejdsgiver
Między podpisanym pracodawcą

paa
na
Poststation
stacja pocztowa
Jernbanestation i Danmark
stacja kolejowa w Danii

og samtlige undertegnede Arbejdere er der afsluttet
følgende Arbejdskontrakt, som bekræftes ved Parternes
Underskrifter:

i wszystkimi podpisanymi pracobiorcami zawarto
następującą umowę roboczą, zatwierdzoną podpisami
stron:

§ 1.
Undertegnede Arbejdere forpligte sig overfor Ar-
bejdsgiveren under dennes Stedfortræder, til at udføre
Landbrugsarbejde paa Ejendommen.....

§ 1.
Podpisani robotnicy zobowiązują się wobec praco-
dawcy czy zastępcy jego, pracować przy gospodarskiej
robocie w majątku

fra 19, indtil i samme Aars
Efteraar alle Mark- og Tærskningsarbejder ere slut-
tede, dog ikke udover 15. December. Arbejderne for-
pligte sig til at udføre Arbejdet godt og ordentligt.

od r. 19 dopóki w jesieni tegoż
roku wszystkie polne roboty wraz z młóceniem nie
będą dokonczone, nie dłużej zaś niż do 15go grudnia.
Robotnicy obowiązują się dostarczyć dobrej i porzą-
dnej pracy.

§ 2.
Enhver Arbejder maa være fyldt 16 Aar og med-
bringe en af Hjemlandets Øvrighed udstedt Legi-
timation.

§ 2.
Każdy robotnik musi mieć 16 lat skończonych i
przywieźć legitymację wydaną przez zwierzchność w
ojczyźnie.

Svangre Arbejdersker samt Personer, der lide af
kronisk Sygdom (derunder Tuberkulose), af venerisk
Sygdom eller af Sindssygdom, maa ikke afslutte Kon-
trakt.

Brzemiennym robotnicom nie wolno zawierać
kontraktu; toż samo osobom mającym chorobę
chroniczną (n. p. suchotę), na weneryę lub na umyśle
chorym.

§ 3.
Der tilkommer enhver Arbejder, som ved Arbejds-
giverens eller hans Befuldmægtigedes Foranstaltning
er indkaldt her til Landet, for hver enkelt Indkaldelse
fri Rejse fra Hjemlandets Grænse til Arbejdsstedet
og tilbage til Hjemlandets Grænse, selv om Arbejderen
ikke straks forlader Landet. Arbejdsgiverens Udgift
til hver Arbejders UdrejseKr. kan han i de første
10 Uger i ugentlige Afdrag fradrage ved Udbetalingen af
den paagældendes fortjente Arbejds løn for at tjene til
Sikkerhed for Arbejdsgiveren, men ved Kontrakttidens
Udløb udbetales — ved sidste Afregning — det saa-

§ 3.
Każdemu robotnikowi sprowadzonemu do tutej-
szego kraju za staraniem pracodawcy lub upelno-
mocnionego tegoż, należy się przy każdym przyjeździe
sprowadzeniu bezpłatna podróż od granicy ojczyzny
do miejsca zajęcia i z powrotem do granicy ojczyzny,
choćby pozostał w Danii. Wydatki pracodawcy na
przyjazd każdego robotnika, mianowicie kor.,
może w ciągu pierwszych 10 tygodni odciągnąć
ze zarobionej roboczej płacy danego robotnika aby
ubezpieczyć pracodawcę; zaś po upływie czasu umo-
wy — przy ostatniej wypłacie — zwróci się bez

Photography 2. The 1912 contract form

THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

In the first period of seasonal migration, roughly until the end of World War I in 1918, a kind of surrogate organisation of emigrant life was provided by the parishes of the revived Catholic Church (the Catholic religion was banned in Denmark for more than 300 years from 1536 to 1849). Polish migrants brought with them to Denmark above all deep Catholic faith, holy images and rosaries. Catholicism was for them an important symbol of Polish culture and identity. The process of establishing Catholic parishes was associated with the influx of Polish economic migrants (before the arrival of the Poles, there were only seven Catholics on the island of Lolland). However, the main problem was the lack of Polish priests. Catholic clergy in Denmark came mainly from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria. There were relatively few Danish priests. Bishop Johannes von Euch appointed the Danish priest Edward Ortved as the minister to the Poles in 1894. Rev. Ortved spoke Polish, he travelled to places where Poles lived by bicycle. He also travelled to Poland, where he perfected his knowledge of Polish, learned about Polish culture, and at the same time raised money to build new churches for Poles in Denmark. In 1897, St. Brigid's Church in Maribo was built with contributions from Poles. The construction of churches was also supported by the local sugar factories. It can be easily claimed that Polish migration strengthened the Catholic Church in Denmark.



Photography 3. The cross in the Museum Polish Barrack

ASSOCIATIONS OF POLES AND POLISH HOUSES

When World War I broke out, the Poles could not return home for the winter. They had to stay in Denmark. Some of them started families and became Polish Danes, while new generations simply became Danes, although many still have recognisable Polish names or surnames. Many Danes in the years between the wars believed that Poles distinguished themselves by their dexterity, diligence, modesty and thrift.

Due to the deteriorating state of economy and rising unemployment in the 1920s, Denmark began to reduce seasonal and permanent migration. It finally stopped accepting immigrants in 1930. During the crisis years, Poles living on the islands of Lolland and Falster felt the need to form their own organisation. On 22 September 1925, the Association of Polish Workers in Denmark was founded in Nakskov. A year later, further branches of the Association were established in Nykøbing Falster and Maribo, and in 1928 in Næstved and Copenhagen. As the number of independent farmers and craftsmen among the Poles in Denmark gradually increased, the name of the organisation soon became inadequate. On 8 October 1933 in Nakskov, at an extraordinary meeting of the Supreme Council of the Association of Polish Workers, the name was changed to the Association of Poles in Denmark (APD). The meeting was attended by the secretary of the Polish Embassy, the famous writer, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. The organisation was growing steadily. By 1938, it had 22 branches and more than 1,200 members throughout Denmark.

In the 1930s, an initiative to build Polish Houses was launched. Fundraising was started and donation certificates and bonds were distributed. The first Polish Houses was created in an acquired hotel in Nakskov in 1933. Other houses were established in Nykøbing Falster (1934) and Maribo (1936). These houses unfortunately no longer exist. The local organisations could not bear the cost of maintaining them. In 2018, the last of the Polish Houses was demolished in Maribo.



Photography 4. Standard of the Trade Union of Polish Workers in Maribo



Photography 5. The Polish House in Maribo, no longer existing

“FELICJA”

During World War II, Denmark assumed the status of a neutral state. Between 1940 and 1941, the Danish authorities expressed kindness towards Poles living in Denmark by granting them fast-track Danish citizenship. At the beginning of the war, the Polish government in London suggested that Poles in Denmark should not enter the structures of the Danish resistance in order not to give the Germans a pretext to apply collective responsibility policy towards Poles. Despite this, it is estimated that around 100 Poles actively fought in the Danish resistance movement. The fact that a Polish underground organisation, code-named “Felicja”, was established in Denmark is a world-wide sensation. The idea of creating an intelligence and sabotage organisation in Denmark originated in 1941 in the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the government in London. Initially, the aim of “Felicja” was to organise an information network among the Polish community about the political, economic and social situation in Denmark, as well as to organise communication routes and the smuggling of people from Poland via Sweden to Denmark (and back). The founding members of the organisation included Bolesław Rediger – former Polish consul in Denmark, Romana Heltberg – Polish language teacher at the University of Copenhagen, and Adam Sokółski – Polish language teacher in Nakskov. They operated in clandestine groups of three, in which each participant knew only two other people from the organisation. In 1943, Lone Mogensen, a Polish-born Danish woman whose father was the director of the Klucze cement works in Jaroszewiec, joined the organisation. In the summer of 1943, 30 people were active in the basic structures of “Felicja”. In September 1943, the Danish resistance warned the Poles active in “Felicja” that the Gestapo was on their trail. Some of the organisation’s leadership managed to escape to Sweden. The leadership of the organisation was passed from Adam Sokółski to Lucjan Masłocha, alias Little, a naval lieutenant, an escapee from the German Oflag XC near Lübeck. In March 1944, some members of the organisation were arrested. Fortunately, after several months in prison, they were released.

On New Year’s Eve of 1943, Lone Mogensen and Lucjan Masłocha married at St. Ansgar’s Cathedral in Copenhagen. Three days later, on the night of 2 to 3 January 1944 they were shot dead by the Gestapo in a villa in Hellerup. They are buried in the cemetery of the heroes of the Danish resistance *Mindelunden* in Copenhagen – Lone as the only woman, Lucjan as the only foreigner.

Also buried in Danish cemeteries (Copenhagen – Bispebjerg, Esbjerg, Frederikshavn, Lemvig, Slaglille, Aabenraa, Aalestrup) are Polish airmen from the RAF and PAF and sailors who died during the war helping occupied Poland.



Photography 6. Lone and Lucjan Masłocha in front of the villa where they were murdered by Gestapo

THE POST-WAR PERIOD

The liberation of Denmark on 5 May 1945 created opportunities for the resumption of the open activities of the Polish diaspora organisations there. The main problem of the Polish community became its attitude to the authorities of the Polish People's Republic and the London government. There was a split in the APD. Despite declarations of non-political involvement, some branches supported the communist government and some remained loyal to the government in London (e.g. Copenhagen, Nykøbing Falster, Næstved). In 1956, the Copenhagen branch adopted the name Association of Free Poles in Denmark (AFPD). At the same time, part of the Copenhagen branch remained within the structures of the APD, which were supported by the embassy of the Polish People's Republic by, inter alia, sponsoring alcoholic

products for the APD events and by discounts in compulsory currency exchange (applicable to visitors to Poland) only for those members who paid association fees. Due to the embassy's action and the lack of an influx of the younger generation, the Copenhagen branch of AFPD and the Næstved branch actually ceased to exist in the 1960s. The AFPD branch in Nykøbing Falster continued to operate until the beginning of the 21st century, partly due to the influx of solidarity emigration. In addition to the AFPD, other independence organisations were active, such as the Association of Polish Veterans, the Branch of the Association of the Home Army Soldiers, the Society of Friends of the Polish University Abroad, the "Ognisko" Association, the "Solidarity" Support Committee.

After 1989, there were attempts to unite the divided Polish diaspora. It was only in 1999, after many attempts, that the unification of the Danish Polonia became a reality. The "Federation of Polish and Polish-Danish Organisations *Polonia*" was established, bringing together the majority of organisations at the time. Currently, there is a crisis in the old Polonia organisations. Some of them have already been liquidated, including one of the oldest organisations – the Association of Poles in Maribo. Others are facing the problem of active members ageing and an insufficient influx of new ones since the newly arrived Poles (after Poland's accession to the European Union) see no need to organise themselves, and if they do, it is usually in virtual form, i.e. via Facebook groups.

A characteristic feature of the Polish community in Denmark is that its members do not focus only on themselves but are open to cooperation with the Danes. Many events organised by the Polish diaspora are attended by representatives of the local municipalities. An example of this was the celebration in 2018 at the Lungholm estate related to the 125th anniversary of the arrival of the first Polish seasonal workers in Denmark, or the subsequent anniversaries of the plane crash in Slaglille, which took place on 17 September 1943. Five Polish airmen were killed then.

THE MUSEUM AND MONUMENT

In 1984 in Taagerup, on the island of Lolland, the Danish journalist Torsten Elsvor initiated a major renovation of the building, which had been built in 1911 by the owners of the Lungholm estate as "a Polish barrack". The cost of the renovation was financed from public collections, donations from

banks, businesses and private individuals. The collection of artefacts also began. The building was given the status of a protected monument. The only museum of its kind in the world dedicated to Polish seasonal workers was established – the Museum Polish Barrack (*Polakkasernen*). Currently, the museum is run by the Society of Friends of the Polish Barrack and is financed from admission tickets revenues, donations and subsidies. More information about the museum can be found on the museum’s website: <http://www.polakkasernen.dk/en/>.

On the market square in the village of Saksøbing, 25 km from the museum, there is a bronze monument “Beet girls” (*Roepiger*), which commemorates Polish seasonal workers. The monument was erected in 1940 and is a work of the Danish sculptor Gottfred Eickhoffs. The monument bears an information plaque (in Danish and Polish). The plaque (unveiled on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the monument) was funded by the Polish Embassy in Denmark and the municipality of Guldborgsund.



Photography 7. Sculpture “Beet girls” by Danish artist Steen B. Langvad in front of the Museum Polish Barrack (*Polakkasernen*)



Photography 8. Monument of beetroot girls in Sakskøbing

EMIGRATION WAVES

Poles emigrated to Denmark for political or economic reasons throughout the period after World War II. Initially, they were people who found themselves in Denmark as so-called “*dipisi*” (*displaced persons*) at the end of the war. Most often these were people who had previously been deported for forced labour or as prisoners of war and prisoners released from German camps. Later, a small number of tourists, e.g. from the ship “Batory”, sailors, fishermen, skilled workers, sportsmen, artists and sometimes even diplomats and politicians asked for asylum in Denmark. A large group of emigrants constitute Polish women marrying Danes and, to a lesser extent, Polish men marrying Danish women. Between 3,000 and 4,000 people came to Denmark as part of the so-called March emigration after 1968. The wave of the so-called Solidarity emigration includes another 2,000 people. It is estimated that about 10,000 people emigrated from Poland to Denmark in the entire post-war period.

AFTER 2004

With Poland’s accession to the European Union, there was a huge wave of economic migration, because Denmark – unlike many other countries – immediately opened its borders to workers from the new EU countries, the vast majority of whom were Poles. According to the latest statistics of the Danish Statistical Office (*Danmarks Statistik*), there were 50,964 Polish citizens in Denmark in 2021, more than 80 per cent of whom were of working age. Poles currently constitute one of the largest immigrant groups in Denmark. Since the statistics do not include the so-called old emigration, i.e. Poles who have since obtained Danish citizenship, it should be assumed that the total number of Poles in Denmark is around 70,000.

130 YEARS OF POLISH EMIGRATION IN DENMARK

Summary

This article summarises the 130-year history of the Polish community in Denmark (the round anniversary is due in 2023). The first Poles in Denmark were seasonal workers who started arriving in the country in the late 19th century where they found employment in agriculture. The 1920s saw the development of Polish organisations in Denmark: the Association of Polish Workers (1925), later renamed the Association of Poles in Denmark, and numerous Polish

Houses. The following decades brought further initiatives undertaken by members of the Polish community in Denmark concerning both their integration and the propagation of Polish culture.

Keywords: Poles in Denmark; Museum Polish Barrack; Maribo; Federation of Polish and Polish-Danish Organisations "Polonia."

130 LAT EMIGRACJI POLSKIEJ W DANII

Streszczenie

Artykuł powstał w celu podsumowania 130-lecia istnienia duńskiej Polonii, które przypada w 2023 roku. Pierwszymi Polakami w Danii byli pracownicy sezonowi przybywający do tego kraju od końca XIX wieku, którzy znajdowali zatrudnienie w rolnictwie. Od lat 20. XX wieku datuje się rozwój polskich organizacji w Danii: powstały Związek Robotników Polskich (1925) przemianowany potem na Związek Polaków w Danii oraz liczne Domy Polskie. Kolejne dekady przyniosły dalsze inicjatywy podejmowane przez członków polskiej społeczności w Danii, a dotyczyły one zarówno integracji, jak i krzewienia polskiej kultury.

Słowa kluczowe: Polacy w Danii; Muzeum Izba Polska; Maribo; Federacja Organizacji Polskich i Polsko-Duńskich „Polonia”.